

FAMILY REUNIONS AND REFUGEESSITUATION IN EAST TIMOR

Since April 1979 many letters received in Australia from East Timor have carried the following items:

- i. Many Timorese (in particular civil servants) gave their names to ICRC personnel who visited East Timor in April 1979, in the hope that ICRC could help them get out of East Timor.
- ii. Many Timorese (in particular civil servants) have refused to give up their Portuguese nationality and accept Indonesian citizenship.
- iii. Those who gave their names to ICRC in April and/or have refused to take out Indonesian citizenship are 'being treated like foreigners in our own country', to quote an oft-used Timorese expression.

This treatment has involved, for example:

- the loss of jobs and unemployment
- imprisonment
- payment of a residential tax
- refusal of permission to travel
- fear that a purge of those who continue to resist or ask to leave the country will be conducted.

In mid-August, the following message came from a civil servant in Dili asking that ICRC be informed of the situation:-

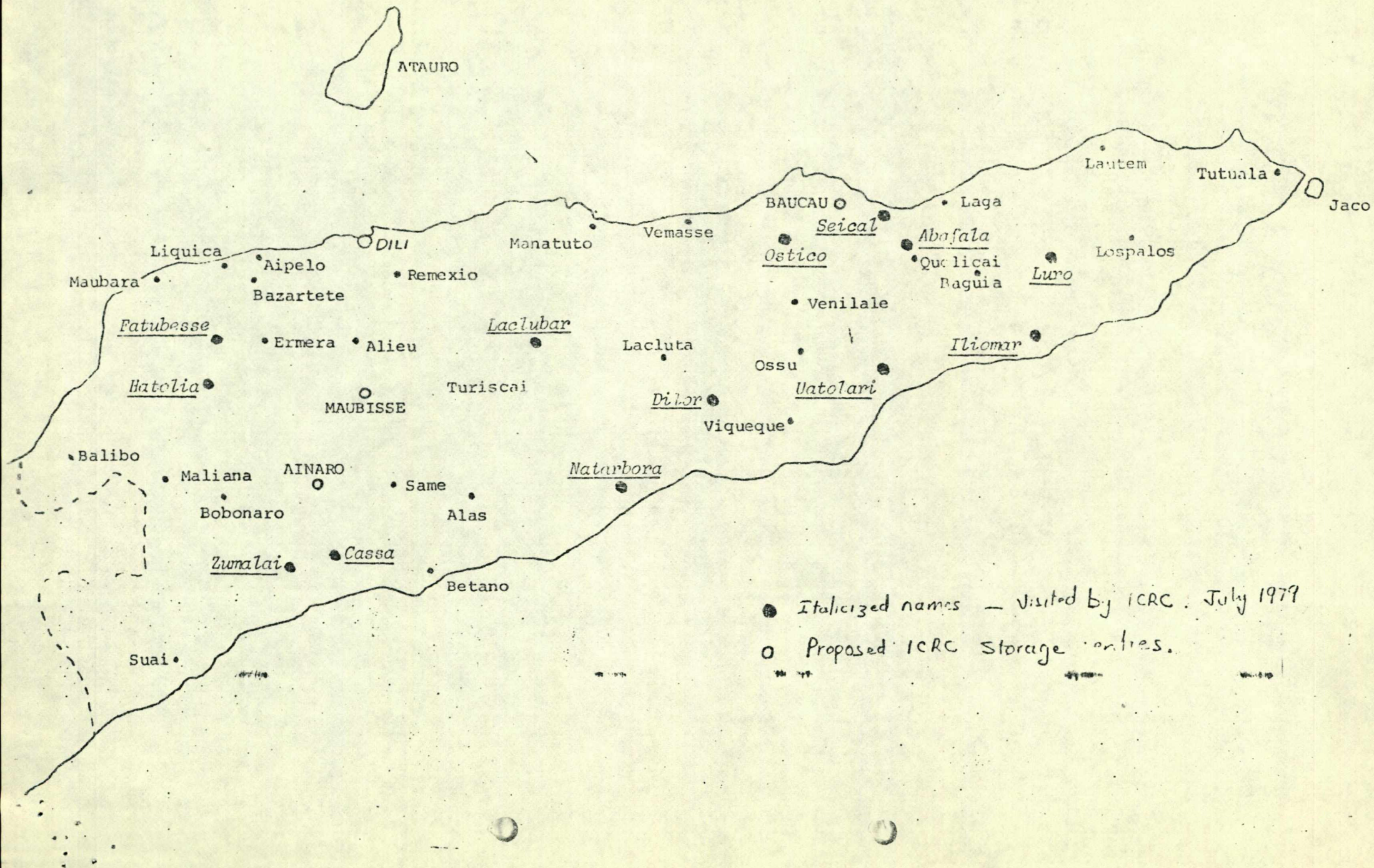
"Try to contact ICRC to help us get out of East Timor because we are in a lot of trouble. With the consent of the ICRC we enrolled ourselves publicly but until now we have not heard anything definite about getting out. All the public servants who put their names down have now lost all their rights. From the 12th (of July?) till now we have just been going to the office to sign our names. From the 1st (of August) we will lose our jobs completely. It's 90% certain we will be killed. Therefore we beg you out of charity to do what you can for us."

(This letter was written in Portuguese. It was posted outside Timor to avoid censorship by the Indonesian military intelligence.)

Other letters confirm this one.

"I am going to ask for more help because from August 1st, all the public servants with Portuguese nationality will be sacked.....X and other public servants like him are not accepted in certain jobs... Everybody is terribly afraid. X and X also gave their names to ICRC to get out. X as well. The Indonesians do not look on us kindly. For a small thing you can be put in prison, if you don't disappear altogether. Many people have already disappeared. No-one is secure at home for fear of being summoned at night.... There is a lot of talk about a cleaning up operation, which has already started. The Church and other people have made a petition through the Papal Nunciature to the authorities to stop this from happening."
(July 14th, 1979)

EAST TIMOR



Loss of jobs is, of course, bad news in itself. Reports are that the cost of living is very high in Dili and those with work carry the responsibility of supporting crowded households in Dili as well as relatives in even worse situations in other places outside the capital. Many in fact look to relatives overseas to support them.

The particular case of the civil servants is but one aspect of a broader problem; viz. that large numbers of East Timorese wish to leave Timor.

This is for one, or a combination, of the following reasons:

- (1) Family reunion. (600 are eligible to come to Australia on this basis, approved in principle by both the Australian and the Indonesian Governments, but to date less than half have arrived here. Ethnic Timorese, even though eligible, have not been allowed to leave Timor for reunion with families abroad. Chinese Timorese with money have been more successful.)
- (2) To escape the difficulties associated with life in Timor today.
- (3) Refusal to live under Indonesian control. This would seem to be by far the most compelling reason. Indonesia has few friends among the Timorese, inside or outside Timor.

The Lisbon paper 'Do Templario' reported in July 1979 that it knew of 21,000 Timorese who wished to leave East Timor.

FAMILY REUNION PROGRAMME

Although we have been pleading since our arrival in Australia, back in 1975, with both the Australian and Indonesian Governments for the reunion of our families in Australia, it was not until January 1979 that the first group of people arrived from Timor. 99 people selected out of the list of 600 by an Australian Immigration team who visited Dili last Christmas, arrived in Darwin on the 14th January. They were mainly elderly people who came to be reunited with their children here. Inconsistencies abounded in this selection. Husbands have been separated from their wives and parents have been separated from their minor children. Where is the logic in that? Our plight was and is for family reunion, not for family separation.

In February this year, surprisingly and unexpectedly, the first group of husbands arrived: Three at first and another six followed them some days later. These nine husbands travelled to Australia directly from Jakarta to Perth without any visas. However, after contact was made with Immigration Officials in Canberra, they were given a temporary visa for one week. They were later allowed to apply for a change of status.

After the arrival of this group of husbands, the Immigration Department started to show its concern regarding illegal entry of East Timorese into Australia.

This concern was raised during daily telephone contacts I had with the officer in charge of the East Timorese Family Reunion programme. At that stage it was agreed that we should come together to discuss the situation and to seek ways for these people to enter Australia.

This meeting, which was held at the Department of Immigration in Canberra, had the following results:

- (1) We promised on behalf of the community that we would endeavour to stop East Timorese from coming illegally to Australia.

In return, we requested the co-operation of immigration officials in ensuring that people should not be delayed in Jakarta for more than one week after their arrival from East Timor.

(2) We were promised by the officer in charge that:

- a) People included on the list of 600 already selected to come would be issued a visa within 24 hours of making contact with the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. They would then undergo medical tests and x-rays and if found in good health, they would immediately be issued with tickets to travel to Australia. If found in bad health, they would have to wait until their medical tests and x-rays were sent to Canberra for medical clearance.
- b) People not on the list who arrived in Jakarta could also apply at the Australian Embassy for a permanent resident's visa for Australia. Their applications would be considered within the normal immigration rules and regulations, guided by the Numa system introduced at the beginning of the current year.

Present situation

Since the agreements reached with the Department of Immigration, there have been no illegal arrivals in Australia.

However, the Immigration authorities broke the agreement after only two weeks. People are now being delayed in Jakarta for periods exceeding one month. The reason given is that ALL medical clearances must be received from Canberra. Apparently there was an Australian Doctor in Jakarta for the first two weeks of the agreement, but he then returned to Australia and was not replaced. When we asked why, we were told that the amount of work did not warrant a full-time medical officer in Jakarta and because of the charge on public funds, the Immigration Department was unable to consider such an allocation.

While the cost to the Australian public would be minimal, the cost to the Timorese people is dramatic.

For example, one woman who arrived with two of her children in Australia in 1975, leaving behind her husband and six children, has already had to pay SA6,000 (bribes, fares Dili-Jakarta and accommodation in Jakarta) to bring her husband and three of the children. There are still three children left in East Timor, and to bring them to Australia will cost at least another SA5,000. This money has had to be either earned or borrowed. Those who cannot afford to pay have no alternative but to remain separated from their loved ones, even though the Australian Government has already agreed that they can come to Australia.

So far, just a little more than one third of the selected 600 people have been able to get to Australia, and of those, there are only one or two ethnic Timorese. Indications at the moment suggest that no-one is able to leave East Timor, and therefore the only people likely to come to Australia are those who have already reached Jakarta. It should be remembered that the Timorese people here in Australia nominated 2,668 people, not 600. The remainder of these people are being treated as normal migrants, yet they have close family here in Australia.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the costs, both financial and human, it is hard to understand the attitudes of those in authority who have power to change the situation and also those who turn a "blind eye" to this kind of exploitation.

Therefore we request:-

- (1) that the Australian Government immediately send an immigration team to East Timor to bring all the people on the agreed list and also all those not on the agreed list but who are eligible to come under the normal immigration requirements;
- (2) that certain other categories of people within the original list of 2,668 be considered, for example:
 - a) parents with dependent children in Australia;
 - b) widowed parents dependent on their children in Australia;
 - c) other special cases to be considered on compassionate grounds.
- (3) that those arriving in Jakarta be processed immediately and not delayed for more than a week.

Joao Goncalves

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